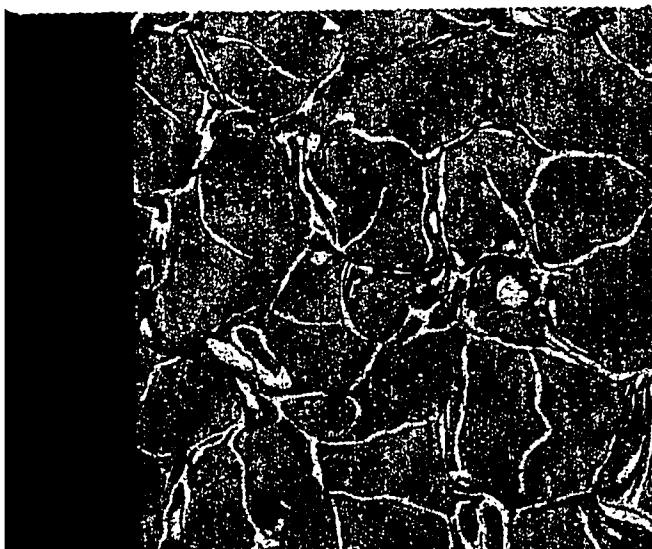




BICKNELL.
RELIEF; A PLAY IN ONE
ACT.





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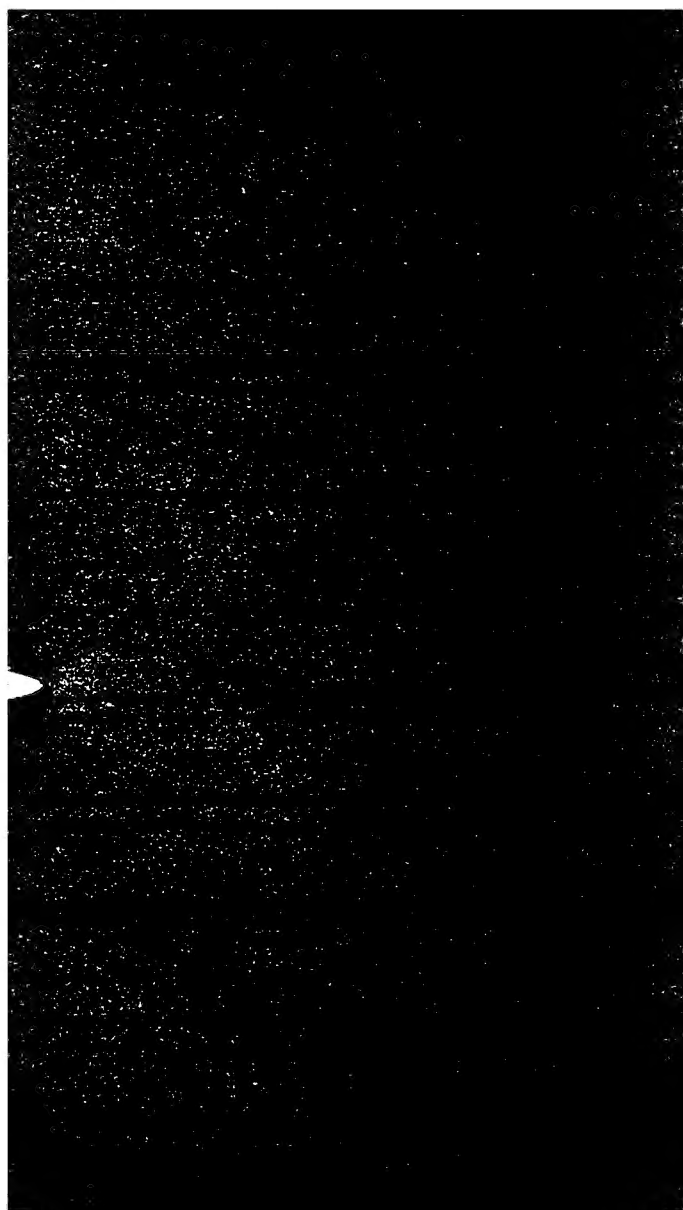


RELIEF

A Play in One Act

Minnie Evans Bicknell

1907
Macmillan



RELIEF



This one-act play won the Cameron McIntosh trophy in the Saskatchewan Regional Drama Festival held in Regina in March 1937. It also won honourable mention in the Dominion Drama Festival at Ottawa in April 1937. It was adjudged the best topical play for 1937 by the *University of Toronto Quarterly*.

RELIEF

A Play in One Act

by

MINNIE EVANS BICKNELL



TORONTO: THE MACMILLAN COMPANY OF
CANADA LIMITED, AT ST. MARTIN'S HOUSE

[1938]

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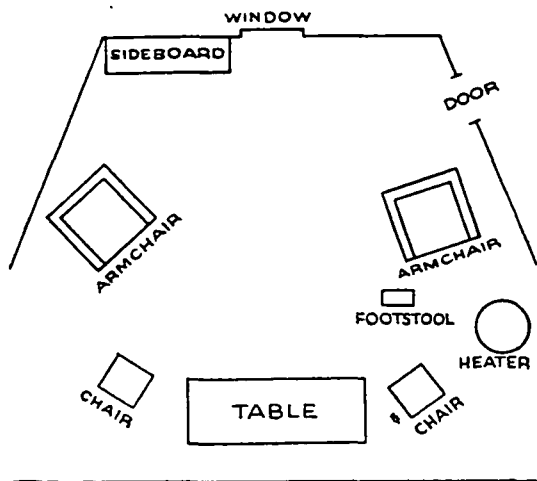
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RELIEF



CHARACTERS

JOHN WEATHERBY A farmer
 MARTHA WEATHERBY His wife
 RALPH Younger son
 WINNIE Younger daughter

Time The Present
 Place Southern Saskatchewan
 Scene.....Living room of John and Martha
 Weatherby's Homestead
 Takes place.....Evening of early spring day, 1935
 Time of playing.....About thirty minutes

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(At rise of curtain the noise of wind is heard, and MARTHA WEATHERBY is seen seated in chair at right of table. A lamp, scissors, thread and other sewing accessories are upon the table. She is patching or darning some article of man's clothing.

At the sound of the wind she draws the shawl she is wearing closer about her shoulders and shivers.

MARTHA is a kindly woman of 45 or 50 years. There is an unmistakable expression of anxiety about her once happy countenance. She seems anxious and is listening for someone to enter.

She carefully examines the article she is mending, as if looking for more holes, and while doing so, sighs deeply.)

Enter JOHN, her husband, from left.

(He is a man of little more than MARTHA'S age, and he has the appearance of being near the breaking point. He is irritable, restless, and at times on the verge of hopeless despair. As he comes into the room, MARTHA looks up and addresses him.)

MARTHA: "Where have you been since supper, John?"

JOHN (Seating himself in chair at left of table):

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"Oh, out looking over the land. It's hopeless, Martha, absolutely hopeless! (Wind noise.) The wind of the past three days has moved every particle that is loose." (Sighs)

MARTHA (*Puts sewing down, gets up and moves toward him, lays her hand on JOHN's shoulder*): "It's early yet, we may get some snow before seeding. Maybe it is not so bad as you think."

JOHN (*Shakes her hand off*): "Bad! Why, it's getting worse every year! Even if we had power and seed to go on trying, it would only be a repetition of what has been before, failure!" (*He takes an old pipe from his pocket and idly fumbles or holds it in his hands as he rests his elbows on his knees in dejected manner.*)

MARTHA: "The Martin boys were here to see if you found out anything about the relief car that was to be here last Tuesday."

JOHN: "Relief! Relief! Hell! A fine name for this system of slow starvation!"

MARTHA: "Have patience, John. Things will come right."

JOHN: "Who's going to put 'em right? Not this system we're under. Mortgage companies, banks and machine companies hounding us! What chance has the farmer? None!"

MARTHA: "But we have organizations, things are being done."

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JOHN: "Like Hell! People are being forced into the road every day. We've hung on now for seven years of crop failure. Our stock most of it dead. Our farming equipment all shot. My life insurance will lapse the first of the month. A hell of a lot of good Relief, as you call it, is going to do us now."

MARTHA (*She has been listening to him, somewhat in alarm. She comes closer and sits, or leans, over table. As she speaks, there is a note of pleading in her voice*): "I know, John, things do look bad now, but maybe they won't turn out so bad after all. We did raise a little last year, and we have managed to keep some horses, and our cows are living, even if they don't give milk. Something will happen, I am sure."

JOHN (*Gets up and with impatient gesture shoves chair back with foot. Speaks in a mocking tone*): "You are sure, are you? Well, I've listened to that same speech from you before; when Bob was away at college and Joan wanted to take a course in some damned fool thing or other —"

MARTHA: "Yes, but —"

JOHN: "Things were getting bad then. (*Moves slowly left, away from MARTHA.*) We had money in the Bank, and should have set tight and held on to it. (*Turns to MARTHA and with louder voice*): I knew it at the time. But no, Bob must finish his course in medicine. The children must

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have their chance. They could work and pay back later, you said."

MARTHA: "Listen, John —"

JOHN: "Let me finish! Well, they had their chance on our savings, and then what happened? Bob went to work in a hospital in B.C. and —"

MARTHA: "But John, you should feel proud that you have been able to educate a son like Bob. He is making good use of the chance we have given him. He is a boy to be proud of."

JOHN (*Sarcastic*): "Yes, it sounds nice to make professional people out of our children. But what do they care for us? Nothing, (*sits*) they would likely be ashamed of us if we walked in on them some day, dressed in our shabby, out-of-date clothes. (*Turns to her.*) They have never turned in one damned cent to help us and I'll never —"

MARTHA (*Advancing toward him with anger*): "John Weatherby. Stop! There is not one word of truth in what you are saying —"

JOHN (*Getting up*): "Oh, I'm a liar, am I? Well, I'll tell you something —"

MARTHA (*In a calmer voice, as she takes him by the shoulder and forces him to sit*): "No, no, John, I didn't mean to say you lied. But I do think you must be losing your mind to rave so about your own children. (*Seats herself on low seat near him.*) You should be thankful that we

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could send the two older ones to school when we did. Now, they are able to earn something for themselves. I can't be thankful enough, for their sakes. We still have Ralph and Winnie and —"

JOHN: "Yes, and the only reason we have them is because you can't get the money to start them off on some highfalutin' rainbow-chase, like the other two. Let 'em work and earn what they get —"

MARTHA: "Listen, John —"

JOHN: "Then they know where it comes from. Trouble is with you, Martha, your ideas are always bigger than my pocket-book."

MARTHA (*Gets up. Speaks in low, deadly tone*): "Look here, John Weatherby, you are not the only one around this place who has worked. I have worked, and so have the children, and they deserve —"

JOHN: "Yes, 'They deserve' (*Gets up*), 'They deserve'. That's all you think about is what they deserve. What in Hell about yourself and me? What do we deserve?"

MARTHA: "We deserve their honour and respect and love, and we have all that, and it is worth more to me than all the money in the world." (*Moves to right of table and sits.*)

JOHN (*Moves in slowly*): "Maybe so, but it's a

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damn poor grub-stake, these hard times."

MARTHA: "I did want to educate Bob and Joan, and I hoped to have money when Ralph and Winnie needed it, but circumstances have changed things."

JOHN (*Sits in chair at left of table*): "Circumstances, is it? Well, I call it damned poor management. Waste! That's what I call it—Waste!"

MARTHA: "Money can't be wasted when it is invested in your children's education."

JOHN: "It's not invested, it's gone, spent, so far as we are concerned. When money is invested, it earns you something."

MARTHA (*Turning to John*): "What has come over you, John? Money isn't everything. Haven't you a bit of interest in your children?"

JOHN: "Who spent money on me? Nobody! I had to work and rustle for myself."

MARTHA (*Leans toward him*): "Listen to me a minute. Who is responsible for these children? Well then, it is our duty to see that they are equipped for a purpose in life. It would be slavery to try to keep them working here. We would lose their love and respect, and besides, they wouldn't stay."

JOHN (*Sarcastic*): "Huh! Do they stay, now? Have you got the ones you educated? You have

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invested good money in them. How do you expect to collect interest?"

MARTHA (*Angry*): "I have faith in my children. Just because they are not here, is no reason to say I have lost them. They have always been a comfort to me; and I thought they were to you, too. It takes time to build up a practice. Bob would give everything he has to help us."

JOHN: "Yes, that's what you think."

MARTHA: "He sent for Joan to help her, didn't he? And she turned over her wages when she taught and we used it. You have forgotten all this."

JOHN (*Gets up*): "If I did use her money, it was no more than fair. (*Moves to door, left.*) Children should shoulder their share of the responsibility, just the same as parents."

MARTHA (*Gets up*): "That is quite right, they—"

JOHN: "Your system makes slaves of the parents, encourages children to leave home, and they are self-centred and never pay for their raising."

MARTHA (*Impatiently taps table*): "My children don't owe me one cent for their raising, and I have not made a slave of myself, either. I have only done what I should have done, and I have no regrets."

JOHN: "No, of course not. You never do have. (*Goes down left and starts cleaning pipe.*)"

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MARTHA (*Moves a little toward JOHN*): "Would you rather Bob had worked here all these dry years, for nothing, and then be forced to go north and homestead, as the only way out?"

(*A door is heard to bang off-stage, and voices and laughter as RALPH and WINNIE enter the kitchen from outside.*)

MARTHA (*Moves a step or two towards door and raises a warning finger at JOHN*): "Sh-sh-sh!"

JOHN (*In a loud voice*): "I have been a darned jelly-fish, that's what I've been. From now on, I'm boss. I say where the money goes—if we ever have any."

RALPH: "Ma, Ma, where are you? (*John goes to window and looks out.*)

MARTHA: "John, please don't let them hear you."

Enter WINNIE and RALPH.

(RALPH is a sturdy youth of 18 or 20 years, looks on the bright side. Intelligent, lovable, and is inclined to be over-confident. He is very fond of his parents and his kid sister.)

(WINNIE, who is two or three years his junior, is a sweet, natural girl, capable of great devotion and it is plain to be seen that RALPH is her hero.)

WINNIE (*Looks at JOHN*): "Oh, here they are, Ralph." (*She comes in just in time to hear something of the last words and realizes something is wrong. RALPH enters the room talking, and does*

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not notice that they have interrupted an argument.)

RALPH (*Goes to stove, left, and warms his hands*): "Gee, Ma, you oughta see how the wind has died down."

WINNIE: "What is it, Mom? What's the matter?"

MARTHA (*Has turned her back and is busy picking up mending things*): "Oh, nothing." (*Sits herself and goes on mending.*)

RALPH: Why all the depression on a fine day like this? I thought everybody would be happy to get a breath of air that isn't full of dirt. Why, we actually ate supper off the table! The first time in a week that we could let the food be uncovered that long."

JOHN: "Yap, yap, when it ain't the wind blowing, it's you, yapping and tearing around. Try to rest a minute, and here you two kids come like a band of wild Indians on the warpath."

MARTHA: "Don't scold the children for playing. Let them be happy."

JOHN: Happy! Happy! (*WINNIE moves to RALPH, RALPH steps in to WINNIE.*) What in Hell is there to be happy about? (*Pause.*) Feed all gone. Fuel about gone. Horses and cattle starving to death. Everything blown away. No relief in sight. Car that should have been unloaded here, Tuesday, gone to God-knows-where."

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MARTHA: "We can't help that. We are here and we must make the best of it. We must stand the test and not lose faith in God."

JOHN (*Still standing by window with pipe in left hand half raised, gripping pipe, tense, has turned and is addressing MARTHA in a mocking, sarcastic tone*): "Test—Faith—God! Huh—God! (*Drops hand. MARTHA rises and stands staring at JOHN. Children move closer together and RALPH lays his hand on WINNIE's arm. They are all turned facing JOHN.*) Oh, Hell! and men and beasts starving." (*Exits.*)

MARTHA: "He must be mad. What will we do? (*Sinks into chair and drops her head on table, sobbing. RALPH and WINNIE go to her.*)

RALPH (*At back of table*): "There, there, Moms, don't you go and get all het up. Dad is just feeling a little off this evening."

WINNIE (*Back of MARTHA's chair*): "Don't cry, Mommie. Everything is going to be all right."

MARTHA: "Oh, I'm afraid! I'm afraid!"

RALPH: "Afraid of what, Moms?"

MARTHA: "Remember what happened to Jack Bins."

WINNIE (*Frightened*): "What? Not the mental hospital!"

RALPH: "Why, Mother, you don't think —"

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MARTHA: "I don't know, children. These are trying times, and your father has been worrying too much, lately. I have never seen him like this before."

RALPH (*Seating himself on back of table*): "Oh, Dad's all right, Mother. The wind and the dirt does get on your nerves more or less, and then he got upset about that feed car getting lost. We had to give Martins some of our feed, to last their cow until the car did come, and then the cow died."

WINNIE: "Yes, and Bessie Martin told me that was the only cow they had left, and now they don't know where they can get milk for the baby."

MARTHA (*Sighs, gets up and goes to window and looks out, anxious about JOHN*): "Is it any wonder that men curse governments, and systems, and lose faith in God?"

RALPH (*Moves to MARTHA. WINNIE joins them*): "Mother, I have been thinking things out for some time, and I have come to the conclusion that something has to be done."

MARTHA (*Turning*): "About what, son?"

RALPH: "About our condition. To help Dad. This thing is getting into him. Dirt seems to have gotten into his brain. He can't think straight. He is losing faith in everybody and everything."

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WINNIE (*At left of MARTHA*): "If only Bob and Joan —"

RALPH: "He don't believe in Bob, Joan, or any of us. Something has to be done, and I guess it's up to me. I'll soon be 20 now, you know."

MARTHA: "Yes, Ralph, but what is there for you to do? You can't get work."

RALPH: "No, but I can go north and homestead. You know the Dean boys, Mike and Jim?"

MARTHA: "Yes."

RALPH: "They went north and took up homesteads last year; now their folks are up there. I had a letter from Jim; he says there is a quarter I can get, close to their homesteads, and if I come now, they will help me build a shack, and I can work with them and put up hay this summer."

MARTHA (*Sighs, moves to stove*): "But you know what your father thinks of homesteading. He says relief is just as bad in one place as it is in another." (*Sits down.*)

RALPH: "Yes, I know. (*Moves to Martha.*) I wasn't going to say anything. I told Winnie and we had it all planned. She was going to help me, and I was going to dig out tonight."

MARTHA (*Rises*): "Tonight!" (*RALPH forces her to sit.*)

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WINNIE: "Yes, Mother (*goes to MARTHA*), and if things look good to Ralph, he can write to Dad, and then a little later, we might coax Dad to take us up there. They say the wild berries are thick and there are lots of wild ducks and chickens. We won't starve."

RALPH: "I should say not! I'll take my gun, and I can shoot, and you and Winnie can pick berries. Dad can cut wood and we'll manage to get a garden ploughed before it is too late, so we can raise some vegetables."

WINNIE: "Won't that be great?"

MARTHA (*Goes to window and looks out again*): "Yes, it sounds nice. But —"

RALPH (*RALPH and WINNIE follow MARTHA to the window*): "But what, Moms?"

MARTHA: "Think of the long trek north in the early spring, to a bare homestead."

RALPH: "Think of the long dry summer here with the wind and the dirt and the grasshoppers."

WINNIE: "Yes, Mommie, think of last summer."

(*MARTHA hesitates. WINNIE and RALPH coax her, one on each side of MARTHA.*) "Let him go, Ma. Come on, Ma, say yes," (*etc.*)

MARTHA (*Sighs*): "All right, I'll help you."

RALPH (*Pats MARTHA on the back*): "At-a-girl, Ma, I knew you would. Now, I am going to tell

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you something. I'm all ready to start."

MARTHA: "What?"

WINNIE: "That's right. We got his things all ready packed and stowed in the hayloft. We didn't want Dad to know, but Ralph decided he wouldn't go without telling you."

MARTHA: "Oh, dear! That would have been terrible. Don't you think you should tell your father, Ralph?"

RALPH: "No."

MARTHA: "Why, Ralph?"

RALPH: "Because, Mother, I have made up my mind; and I know Dad. I will tell him later."

MARTHA: "All right, Son. If you feel like that. It may be for the best."

WINNIE: "I wish I was a boy, I'd go."

RALPH: "No, you wouldn't, I'm the oldest. It's my place to go. You stay here and help Ma."

WINNIE: "Is zat so? Well, you don't need to be so smart, Biggity! You didn't think of it all. I helped, and I got most of your old stuff ready! (*Walks down stage pouting, and sits.*)"

MARTHA: "Children, children!" (*Sits at table.*)

RALPH (*Putting on coat he gets from inside the kitchen door*): "Well, Ma, I'm off as soon as we say good-bye."

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MARTHA (*Moves to WINNIE*): "Not tonight, Ralph. You are not going now."

RALPH: "That's the plan."

MARTHA: "But you're not ready. I've got to see that you have what you will need."

WINNIE: "You don't need to, Moms. He has everything. I been getting him ready for days. Let him go. I think it's a good idea." (*With a mischievous look at RALPH.*)

RALPH: "Oh, you do, do you?" Well, how'd you like some nice chin-pie before I go?" (*This speech with his arm around her neck, rubbing her face with his whiskers. WINNIE yells, and fights him off.*)

MARTHA (*Shaking RALPH's arm*): "Ralph, you stop that!" (*They are all three near the centre of the stage.*)

RALPH (*Laughing*): "Well, she asked for it!" (*WINNIE goes right.*)

MARTHA: "How were you intending to carry your stuff?"

RALPH: "I'll take Smokey. Put the pack on his back and lead him."

MARTHA: "I guess you are equal to the task. You are a man now, Ralph, and God bless you!"

RALPH (*Straightening himself to full height and tapping himself on the chest*): "That's me, Ma."

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Off to the frontier to battle the wilds and win."

WINNIE: "Yes, it is going to be easy, Ma. All we gotta do is root for the winners, and we're It, with a big I."

MARTHA: "Winnie and I will go as far as the barn to see you off. But, where did your father go?"

RALPH: "I don't know."

WINNIE: "I know. Over to Uncle Billy's."

RALPH: "Come on, then, let's get going before he comes back. If he sees Smokey with that pack, he'll go straight up. Besides, I gotta step on it to get to Warren's place before they go to bed, so I can stop there for the night."

MARTHA: "All right, I'll just check over your stuff to make sure you have ~~everything~~." (Exit all.)

CURTAIN

(To denote time MARTHA and WINNIE are out seeing RALPH off. Curtain rises on dim-lit stage.)

(Curtain rises on an empty stage. MARTHA and WINNIE enter as if they had just come from seeing RALPH off. They go to window and look out, as if watching him go.)

(MARTHA goes to table and lights lamp.)

MARTHA: "I don't know what your father will

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say when he finds out Ralph is gone." (Goes to left of table and sits.)

WINNIE (Comes down to back of table): "What can he say, Mother? Winter is over, spring is coming. He can't blame Ralph. There is nothing here for any of us."

MARTHA: "Yes, Winnie, that is true, 'nothing here for any of us'. After all these years! Your father came here in the early days, with youth and confidence, like Ralph said tonight in jest: 'To battle the wilds and win.' The years gradually slipped by without us noticing the change in ourselves. I loved this home, Winnie, and sometimes when I look out at the wastes of barren, wind-swept prairie, and think about having to start all over again, I feel very tired and old."

WINNIE (Putting arms around mother): "Oh, Mommie, don't say that. You will never be old to me. Ralph will find a place for us, I am sure, and when we are settled there, things will be like they used to be."

MARTHA: "I hope so, Winnie."

WINNIE: "We will be happy again, Mother. Are you going to wait up for Dad and tell him about Ralph?"

MARTHA: "Yes, I shall wait and tell him."

WINNIE (Bringing footstool to MARTHA'S knee and seating herself upon it): "Tell me something

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about the early days, when you lived in the little old sod shack."

MARTHA: "Did I ever tell you about how we came to possess our first cow?"

WINNIE: "No. Please tell me."

MARTHA: "We were living in the sod shack then, and Bob was five months old. We knew that he would soon be needing fresh milk and the problem was how were we going to get it."

WINNIE: "Couldn't you get it from the neighbours?"

MARTHA: "No. Cows were not so plentiful in those days. Besides, our nearest neighbour was three miles. It was springtime. The snow was just about gone. The wild duck and the crows had returned, and you could find an odd crocus here and there. The ranchers farther south and east were moving their herds north to their summer grazing leases. Our supplies were getting low, so we had planned to go to town the following day. In the morning, the baby showed symptoms of a cold and I decided to stay at home with him. So Dad started off bright and early."

WINNIE: "How far was it to town, Mommie?"

MARTHA: "Eighteen miles. A couple of hours after he left, I noticed a dark cloud coming up in the north and about this time a big herd of

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cattle were driven by. At noon the sky was leaden and a strong wind was blowing flakes of snow through the air. In a very few hours the temperature had dropped 32 degrees, and a terrible blizzard was raging."

WINNIE: "Oh, Mom, weren't you frightened?"

MARTHA: "Not for myself. But I was worried about your father having to face the storm coming home. It was about four o'clock and I knew darkness would soon be coming. I was getting ready to do my evening chores, when I heard a cow bawling. I went to investigate and found a heifer that had evidently got separated from the herd that had passed earlier in the day, and drifted back with the storm. I opened the gate and she went into the hay lot, there she had feed and shelter. And imagine our surprise when we looked out next morning and saw a baby calf by her side."

WINNIE: "Did you get to keep her?"

MARTHA: "Yes, when the storm was over, the men stopped on their way home and they said she could travel no farther, so they left her by the roadside. They asked us to keep her."

WINNIE: "But what about Dad? Did he stay in town until the storm was over?"

MARTHA: "No. Dad wouldn't do that. He was worried about us being all alone in the storm,

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and he knew Bob was not well either, so he kept coming on. But he did not get there till very late, for he had to walk to keep from freezing. And then he dare not drive the horses for fear he might pull them off the trail and get lost."

(A whistle is heard off-stage.)

WINNIE: "That sounds like Ralph." (Runs to window.) "It is Ralph, and he is mighty happy about something, too." (Runs to door and exits. Her voice is heard outside.) "Ralph, what on earth did you come back for?"

(RALPH enters.)

MARTHA (Has risen and followed WINNIE toward the door: as RALPH enters she meets him): "Ralph, why did you come back?"

RALPH: "A telegram for you and Dad, Ma, from Bob and Joan. Here, read it."

MARTHA (Takes telegram and WINNIE and RALPH stand close looking on as she reads): "'Dear Folks, get ready to come at once. Have option on farm.' (The report of a gun is heard from outside.) What was that?"

RALPH: "That? Oh, that's only the pump engine back-firing. Dad must be out there."

WINNIE: "It sounded like a gun."

MARTHA (Resumes reading): "'Have option on farm and equipment. Joan has contract for sing-

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ing over N.B.C. Bob has appointment as surgeon in city hospital. Letter and money to follow.' Signed 'Bob and Joan'."

RALPH (*Tossing hat into the air*): "Hot dog! Now we won't have to homestead."

WINNIE (*Leaning against the table in thoughtful mood*): "Isn't it fine for Bob and Joan to do that for us?"

MARTHA (*Still holding telegram as if reading it again to herself, turns to RALPH*): "How did you come to get it, Ralph; who gave it to you?"

RALPH: "Just as I came to the railroad track, I met the Howard kid. He said he had a telegram for us. So I took it and looked to see if it was bad news."

MARTHA: "Ralph, you go and find your father."

RALPH: "Okay, Ma, but I gotta put Smokey away before Dad sees him." (*Exits.*)

WINNIE: "Oh, Mommie, this seems like a wonderful dream. I am afraid I will wake up and find it isn't true after all."

MARTHA: "Well, Winnie, I feel as if I had awakened from a terrible nightmare."

WINNIE: "I wonder what Dad will say. Poor Dad! He has been blue."

MARTHA: "He will take a new lease on life, I am sure."

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RALPH (*Is heard to call from outside in distance. His voice grows louder as he approaches the house*): "Mother! Mother! Mother!" (MARTHA and WINNIE start, look at each other, then go toward the door just as RALPH enters.)

RALPH (*Tries to speak and is powerless to utter a word.*)

MARTHA (*Shaking him by the shoulders*): "What is it, Ralph? Speak to me!"

RALPH (*In choking voice*): "That shot, it was Dad!"

MARTHA: "My God! Where is he?" (*Rushes out followed by WINNIE.*)

(RALPH, with bowed head and sagging gait, slowly follows as curtains close.)

THE END

